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GULF TIMES SPORT



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PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool and Chelsea stumble again in CL race

Fulham beat Burnley to move within five points of Liverpool

AFP
London

Chelsea failed to take advantage of another Liverpool stumble in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League yesterday, thumped 3-0 by Everton to remain outside the top five.

Champions Liverpool had slipped to a 2-1 defeat at Brighton in the early kick-off - their 10th loss of a dismal Premier League title defence. But Chelsea's thumping reverse at the Hill Dickinson Stadium gives renewed hope to a clutch of clubs below them, including Everton themselves, Brentford and Fulham.

The top five teams in the Premier League are almost guaranteed to play Champions League football next season due to the strong showing of English clubs in Europe. Arsenal are hot favourites to land the Premier League title for the first time since 2004, with second-placed Manchester City well clear of city rivals Manchester United in third.

United, who drew 2-2 at Bournemouth on Friday, are four points clear of fourth-placed Aston Villa, who host struggling West Ham today. Liverpool arrived on the sunny south coast after a morale-boosting 4-1 aggregate win over Galatasaray at Anfield in midweek to reach the Champions League quarter-finals.

But they were well beaten by Fabian Hurler's hungry Brighton, for whom evergreen forward Danny Welbeck scored twice, either side of Milos Kerkez's well-taken goal for the visitors.

Liverpool boss Arne Slot pointed to key injury absences and a swift turnaround from Champions League commitments to explain the damaging defeat. The Dutchman was without goalkeeper Alisson Becker and forward Mohamed Salah at the Amex Stadium, while top-scorer Hugo Ekitike limped off early.

Defeat left the reigning champions with only one point from the past nine after they conceded late goals in a 2-1 loss at bottom club Wolves and last weekend's 1-1 draw at home to relegation-threatened Tottenham.

"Brighton away, that's a difficult game for any team, especially if you miss out on a few very influential players," said Slot. "Of course now, looking at the league table, this loss hurts a lot and it should hurt us a lot."



Brighton's Danny Welbeck (right) scores against Liverpool in the Premier League at the American Express Community Stadium in Brighton. (Reuters)

Brighton's Welbeck, who made his Premier League debut for Manchester United in 2008, is enjoying his highest-scoring season in the league, though was not included in Thomas Tuchel's latest England squad. Liverpool are still alive in the Champions League and the FA Cup but face the real prospect of ending the season trophyless, with daunting quarter-finals to come against Paris Saint-Germain and Manchester City.

Chelsea collapsed to their fourth straight defeat in all competitions against Everton, giving new coach Liam Rosenior a major headache as he tries to salvage their season. With United drawing and Liverpool losing, Chelsea had the chance to go fourth, four points behind the Red Devils, but they blew it in spectacular style.

Everton's win, courtesy of two goals from

Beto and a curler from Iliman Ndiaye, lifted them within three points of neighbours Liverpool with a home Merseyside derby to come next month. Rosenior, who replaced Enzo Maresca in January, must now find a way to lift his expensively assembled squad, who won the Club World Cup and the UEFA Conference League last season.

Chelsea are still in the FA Cup but were humiliated 8-2 on aggregate by PSG in the last 16 of the Champions League. Fulham leapfrogged Brighton, moving to within five points of Liverpool, after coming from behind to beat relegation-bound Burnley 3-1.

Zian Flemming gave the Clarets a shock lead at Craven Cottage, but Fulham hit back through Joshua King, Harry Wilson and Raul Jimenez. Burnley are nine points adrift of safety with just seven games remaining.

Qatar step up World Cup build-up with 32-man training camp squad

QATAR NATIONAL TEAM LIST FOR MARCH 2026

Coach: **Julen Lopetegui**

Qatar's preparations for the FIFA World Cup 2026 have gathered pace after coach Julen Lopetegui named a 32-man Al Annabi squad for a training camp during the upcoming international break, the Qatar Football Association announced yesterday. The players will assemble as the national team intensifies its build-up to the global showcase to be staged across the United States, Canada and Mexico this June and July. Qatar had initially lined up high-profile friendlies against Serbia and Argentina later this month as part of the Qatar Football Festival, but the matches were cancelled due to regional tensions. Al Annabi are now scheduled to face Ireland at the Aviva Stadium on May 28 in what will be a key fixture in the final phase of their preparations. Qatar have been drawn in Group B alongside hosts Canada, Switzerland and a team that will emerge from the first European play-off.

Leaders Al Arabi target 16th straight win in Qatar Handball League

Doha: Five matches will be played today in round 16 of the Qatar Men's Handball League, with leaders Al Arabi aiming to extend their perfect run this season. Al Arabi, who top the standings with 45 points, will face fifth-placed Al Ahli (28 points) as they seek their 16th consecutive victory, having yet to drop a point in the competition.

Second-placed Al Duhail (41 points) will take on Al Gharafa (24 points), while third-placed Al Rayyan (37 points) meet fourth-placed Al Sadd (29 points)

in the round's standout clash. Elsewhere, Al Khor (27 points) face Qatar SC (21 points), and Al Wakrah (26 points) take on Al Shamal (22 points).

Al Rayyan remain the most successful club in the history of the Qatar Men's Handball League with 15 titles, followed by Al Sadd with nine. Al Duhail have won the championship five times, while Al Ahli and Al Jaish have four titles each. Al Arabi have claimed three titles, Qatar SC two, and Al Gharafa and Al Wakrah one apiece.

LA LIGA

Bellingham back, Mbappe fully fit ahead of Madrid derby: Arbeloa



Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe (left) and Trent Alexander-Arnold train in Madrid.

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said he has "maximum confidence" in French superstar Kylian Mbappe ahead of the derby clash against Atletico Madrid.

Mbappe returned from a knee sprain as a substitute against Manchester City on Tuesday after missing five games and Arbeloa said he was excited to have the forward back at 100 percent, along with fit-again England international Jude Bellingham.

The duo will be in Madrid's squad for today's La Liga game against Diego Simeone's Atletico at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"I already told you that the day (Mbappe) came back would be when he was at 100 percent," Arbeloa told reporters. "I think that in the minutes we saw him in Manchester, with the two or three bursts of pace he made, every one of those actions showed he's in great shape and, above all, (it's about) his own feelings... We have maximum confidence, maximum security, maximum excitement to have a player like him back, so decisive and at 100 percent."

Mbappe is Madrid's top goalscorer this season with 38 goals in 34 games across all competitions. Arbeloa said he was happy that the French national team have called up

Mbappe for matches against Brazil and Colombia next week in the United States.

"I think it's fantastic. He's a player who's available to the coach, who has already played with us, who's definitely going to play tomorrow, so I don't see any problem with him going with his national team," added Arbeloa.

England coach Thomas Tuchel called up Bellingham for international duty even though the midfielder has not played since February 1 because of a hamstring injury. "He's now available, he'll be in the squad tomorrow. We'll see if he plays. I think he will, he's available and I'm really looking forward to seeing him out on the pitch," said Arbeloa.

"From there it's normal that he can go with his national team. It's clear that Jude Bellingham is a very intelligent player, he knows especially well what he's doing at every moment and the situation he's in, but from my side I'm very happy that he'll be available tomorrow and ready to help us."

Madrid will be without goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, who is set to miss several weeks with a thigh injury, but Arbeloa said he had faith in his replacement Andriy Lunin. "The best goalkeeper in history gets injured, and we have another outstanding goalkeeper with us who will once again show how good he is," said Arbeloa, adding he has "utmost confidence" in the Ukrainian.

LEVANTE BEAT OVIEDO TO BOOST SURVIVAL HOPES

Levante earned a crucial 4-2 win over Real Oviedo in La Liga to boost their hopes of avoiding relegation. In-form striker Carlos Espi netted twice for the Valencia side, 19th, in the opening 25 minutes against bottom-of-the-table Oviedo.

Ilyas Chaira and a Federico Vinas penalty helped Oviedo pull level towards the end of the first half. However Iker Losada edged Levante ahead soon after the break with a deflected effort and Ivan Romero tucked home in stoppage time to seal Levante's win.

Luis Castro's side sit provisionally two points from safety, although Alaves, 17th, will play against Celta Vigo on Sunday.

Oviedo are losing hope of staying in the top flight and are seven points behind Alaves with nine matches remaining. "We knew that it was an important game... we needed the win and we worked to get it," said Espi, who has scored six goals in his last four matches.

Elche, 16th, also earned a crucial 2-1 victory over Mallorca which left the islanders 18th. The hosts ended a 13-game run across all competitions without a win, in part thanks to Mallorca striker Vedat Muriqi firing over a stoppage time penalty.

Getafe moved eighth by beating Espanyol 2-1 while Osasuna are ninth after defeating Girona 1-0.

ATHLETICS

Switzerland's Ehammer sets indoor heptathlon world mark

'I am very grateful for all guys in the field - we were in a great fight and it motivated me a lot.'



Switzerland's Simon Ehammer celebrates winning and setting a new world record in the men's heptathlon 1000m final during the World Athletics Indoor Championships in Torun, Poland, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Torun, Poland

Switzerland's Simon Ehammer set a new world record for the men's heptathlon at the world indoor championships in Torun, Poland, yesterday. The Swiss accrued a total of 6,670 points over seven events, beating the previous best of 6,645pts set by American Ashton Eaton at the 2012 world indoors in Istanbul.

Over two days of competition, Ehammer topped the 60m (in 6.69sec), long jump (8.15m), 60m hurdles (7.52) and pole vault (5.30m) while also performing well in the shot put (14.87m) and high jump (2.02m). That left him within range come the seventh and final event, the lung-busting 1,000m. The 26-year-old, who was fourth in the long jump at both last year's world outdoors in Tokyo and the Paris Olympics, did not disappoint. He clocked 2min 41.04sec to seal a comprehensive victory and a new record by just 25pts. Ehammer said it was "dream come true".

"I badly wanted to improve my European record here but it was difficult to imagine that the world record would be possible as well," said the Swiss athlete who dropped out of the decathlon at the Paris Games after failing to register a mark in the high jump.

"I went through all events fighting for my goal, starting from the first one. Just look at my second day of competition - a personal best over the hurdles kicked me off. I fought for every single height in the pole vault. It was not easy to clear 5.10m, 5.20m and 5.30m at my third attempts. I am very grateful for all guys in the field - we were in a great fight and it motivated me a lot."

The American duo of Heath Baldwin (6,337pts) and Kyle Garland (6,245) completed the podium after two days of thrilling competition.

Doroshchuk wins gold

Oleh Doroshchuk won Ukraine's second gold of the championships when he claimed victory in the men's high jump yesterday. Doroshchuk cleared 2.30 metres for his first global podium, his win coming fast on the heels of teammate Yaroslava Mahuchikh's victory in the women's high jump on Friday.

Mexico's Erick Portillo took silver on countback, with Jamaica's Raymond Richards and South Korea's defending champion Woo Sanghyeok sharing bronze, having both gone over 2.26m. Belgium claimed the opening gold of the day in the mixed 4x400m, in its world indoor debut.

The quartet of Jonathan Sacor, Ilana Hanssens, Julien Watrin and Helena Ponette clocked 3min 15.60sec for victory.

Relays powerhouse USA had won the mixed 4x400m at the past two outdoor world champs, but a botched first handover by Jevon O'Bryant left Sara Reifenhuth prone and without one shoe - and all hopes for a podium gone.

Blanca Hervas' surge for the line ensured silver for Spain, Poland taking bronze. Also on the track, Britain's Keely Hodgkinson, who smashed the indoor 800m world record last month, kept her hopes of a first-ever world indoor title on track as she sailed through to the final of the four-lap race.

Untimely injuries have prevented the 24-year-old from taking part in the past three editions of the world indoors. But the Briton, who earned Tokyo Olympic silver and Paris Olympic gold and who has two world outdoor silver medals and a bronze, looks to be in perfect shape and coasted through her heat in 1:58.53.

Sweden's pole vault king Armand Duplantis returned to the scene of his first world record, to win a record-equalling fourth world indoor title in dominant fashion yesterday. Duplantis, who set the first of his 15 world records (6.17m) in the Polish city back in 2020, vaulted six times and cleared the bar each time, winning with a best of 6.25m. In a masterclass his rivals could only look on at in awe, Greece's Emmanouil Karalis took silver (6.05m) and Australian Kurtis Marschall bronze (6.00).

Britain's Kerr outsprints Hocker for world indoor 3,000m gold

Britain's Josh Kerr produced a devastating final lap to win gold in the men's 3,000m at the world indoor championships in Torun, Poland, yesterday. Kerr hit the front at the bell and clocked 7min 35.56sec for victory in a tactical race, 0.14sec ahead of US rival Cole Hocker. France's Yann Schrub claimed bronze. "It's nice to be back to where I was," said Kerr, who won the world indoor title two years ago but sustained a calf tear at last year's 1,500m final at the world outdoors in Tokyo.

"This race didn't go the way I wanted it to, but racing is all about dealing with the situations you are put in.

"I shouldn't worry much about the mistakes in the race, although there were a lot of them today. I didn't have time to think about them, I had to push.

"I wanted this gold medal so badly. I had all kind of scenarios in my head and I am just pleased it all went in my favour today." The 15-lap race had been heralded as one of the stand-out events at the world indoors.

The 15-strong field featured the full men's 1,500m podium from

the 2024 Olympics along with the world 3,000m steeplechase champion, New Zealand's Geordie Beamish, in a stacked clash of medallists.

Hocker, who already has Olympic 1,500m and world 5,000m titles to his name, was targeting his first world indoor title after 1,500m silver in 2024, while 2023 world 1,500m champion Kerr was eyeing a second world indoor title two years on from his victory in Glasgow.

Also in the running was the USA's Olympic 1,500m bronze medallist Yared Nuguse, who got 3,000m silver behind Kerr two years ago. Luan Munnik took up the early running, the South African closely followed by Hocker, who soon took over the lead, with Nuguse on his tail.

Kerr ambled along in the middle of the pack as the Ethiopian pair of Addisu Yihune and Getnet Wale surged with nine laps to go. Beamish was in last, well off the pace, which saw the field split into single file through the halfway mark. Kerr made his way up through the field to sit on Hocker's shoulder in fifth.

With two laps to go, it was still the

Ethiopians in control, but their teamwork went astray as they collided.

It was then that Kerr made his move past Hocker and Nuguse. As the bell rang for the final lap, Kerr struck, Schrub following on his coattails.

Hocker kicked down the home stretch to nip in front of the Frenchman, but he had left himself too much to do and Kerr streaked through with gritted teeth for a second world indoor title.

"I have won at world outdoors and world indoors back to back and I took it for granted," said Kerr.

"I thought I would be at the top of the sport for a long time but, after missing a couple of opportunities that I wanted, I am really going to enjoy this gold.

"It took a lot of work to be standing on the podium today."

Hocker said it was "a bit of a disappointment not to come away with the gold".

"Getting a medal is always incredible and I am proud of it but you've got to shoot for the stars." Nuguse finished fifth behind Kenya's Jacob Krop, while Beamish eventually came in 14th, almost 10sec down on Kerr's pace.



Josh Kerr celebrates winning the 3000m final during the World Athletics Indoor Championships. (AFP)

GOLF

DeChambeau maintains 2-shot lead

Reuters
Johannesburg

Bryson DeChambeau carded two eagles yesterday to maintain a two-shot lead at the inaugural LIV Golf event in South Africa.

Southern Guards, the home favorites, lead the team event entering the final round at Steyn City in Johannesburg.

DeChambeau posted a 7-under-par 64 in the third round to move to 21 under, two shots ahead of South Africa's Branden Grace. He eagled the par-4 fifth hole and the par-5 10th and added birdies at Nos. 1, 4 and 18 in a bogey-free round at the Jack Nicklaus-designed course. DeChambeau, 32, remains red hot after winning the LIV Golf Singapore event last week for his fourth career individual title on the circuit.

"Tomorrow is going to be a great day," DeChambeau said. "Gracey is playing some incredible golf, and it's fun to be alongside him playing some good golf, as well. He's got a



Bryson DeChambeau acknowledges fans during the third round of the LIV Golf event in Midrand, South Africa, yesterday. (Reuters)

huge hometown support, and it's cool to feed off of that energy, so hopefully there's a little bit more energy, and I can kind of feed off of that. I like it."

Grace also turned in a 64 thanks to an eagle on the par-5 fourth hole plus six birdies and one bogey. The Southern Guards member birdied the last two holes to open a one-stroke lead over Mexico's Abraham Ancer (64 on Saturday) and Spain's Jon Rahm (64), who sit at 18-under. Belgium's Thomas De-

try (63), South Africa's Dean Burmester (65) and Spain's David Puig (66) are tied for fifth place at 17 under. Tied for eighth at 16 under are Mexico's Carlos Ortiz (65) and Charles Howell III (66).

Grace's and Burmester's Southern Guards teammates Louis Oosthuizen (64) and Charl Schwartzel (65) are part of a six-way tie for 18th at 12 under. "What a day. All four boys had a good day," Burmester said. "It looks like all four of us scored well. I don't know what the total is, but Gracey just birdied 17. For me, honestly, I'm so proud of all the guys, and for us to be in the hunt for the team thing is incredible."

Oosthuizen said the "rowdy boys" in the gallery have added to the excitement of chasing the team title on home soil. "We're feeding off the energy at the moment," he said. "I mean, we're playing - me and Charl were playing so-so, and today we really felt the energy, and obviously Dean and Branden are playing well, so I think we can just go tomorrow and pull this thing through."

Sungjae Im drains late birdie for 36-hole Valspar lead

South Korea's Sungjae Im rolled in a 7-foot birdie putt on the 17th hole on Friday to grab the 36-hole lead at the Valspar Championship in Palm Harbor, Fla. Im, who entered the day with a two-shot lead, drifted down the leaderboard by going out in 1-over 37 on the Copperhead Course at Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club. However, he regained momentum with consecutive birdies on hole Nos. 11 and 12 before sticking his tee shot tight on the difficult 180-yard par-3 17th. He ended the day with a 2-under 69 and sits at 9 under for the tournament. That's one-shot clear of David Lipsky, who carded a 6-under 65 during the morning wave. Another shot back are Doug Ghim and Chandler Blanchet. Brooks Koepka, who spent the first half of his round hovering around the cut line, poured in four birdies over a five-hole stretch on his back nine to post a 67. He is at 4 under for the tournament, tied for 10th in a group of seven players

that includes FedEx Cup leader Jacob Bridgeman, Tony Finau and Gary Woodland. Koepka grew up about four hours from Innisbrook and said he played the course "a bunch" during his junior golf days. That familiarity is paying off this week, as is getting more comfortable while making his fifth start in his return to the PGA Tour. He's coming off a T9 at the Cognizant and a T13 at The Players after missing the cut at the WM Phoenix Open.

"I just think it's more reps," he said. "First week (back at the Farmers Insurance Open) just wanted to make the cut and kind of get it over with. Then Phoenix just kind of exposed how bad the putting was. I was able to fix that, correct that, and made some adjustments and here we are." Xander Schauffele, the top-ranked player in the field at No. 7 in the world, was at 5 under on Friday before bogeying three of his final seven holes. He sits in a tie for 27th at 2 under.

COMMENT

World Athletics decision to hand Asia two world indoors strategic, says Coe

AFP
Torun, Poland

World Athletics president Sebastian Coe said yesterday that the decision to hold the next two world indoor championships in Asia was "strategic", with both venues having come through tough evaluations.

The city of Bhubaneswar in Odisha state in eastern India will host the world indoors in 2028, while the Kazakh capital Astana was chosen for the 2030 edition.

Coe, speaking to reporters at the ongoing world indoors in Torun, Poland, justified the decision to move the global three-day competition to Asia as an opportunity to "get more than a toe hold" in important markets.

"First of all, Asia is a very large continent and if you really want to define it, we're talking from Qatar to the Philippines," he said. "So it's not a one size fits all. It's not sort of saying it's like Europe, where in three hours, you're basically almost out of Europe in most directions."

Coe added: "Why those two? First of all, they threw their hats in the ring. Secondly, they went through a really tough set of evaluations."

An independent evaluation panel "makes judgements across competence, about integrity, about commercial opportunities, the strategic imperatives", added the two-time Olympic 1500m gold medallist for Britain.

With large populations, Coe continued, comes "a pretty sophisticated sports marketing landscape".

"We witness that in everything from cricket through to For-



President of World Athletics Sebastian Coe reacts during the opening ceremony of World Athletics Indoor Championships in Torun. (AFP)

mula One, now even the Premier League, you know it is where we need to be.

"I've been in Bhubaneswar on a few occasions... it is a big sporting hub in India. It has very strong political leadership down there.

"I was there not that long ago for the Asian track and field championships. World Cup hockey tournaments are held there. It's a sporting hub where they do deliver sports events."

Turning to Kazakhstan, Coe added: "I was in Astana not that long ago. They have identified athletics as their number one strategic sport.

"In Kazakhstan in the last six or seven years, they've built some outstanding indoor athletics facilities and their ability and their appetite to play a bigger role in world athletics is again another interesting market for us.

"Central Asia is hugely important, so for strategic reasons, they're good bids to have at the table, and I hope in both those cases, they open other opportu-

nities for us to get more than a toe hold in those marketplaces."

The choice of Odisha comes with Amdavad, the city also known as Ahmedabad - in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat - confirmed as host city for the 2030 Commonwealth Games, which will feature a full track and field programme. That is widely viewed as a stepping stone to bidding to host the 2036 Olympics, and erasing memories of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi - an event marked by construction delays, substandard infrastructure and accusations of corruption.

When Amdavad was confirmed for the Commonwealths, Coe said at the time that India was "already expressing interest in hosting major global athletics events, and the long-term aspiration to host a World Athletics Championships - and one day the Olympic Games".

Coe said it was a "powerful sign of a nation thinking boldly about its sporting future".

MOTOGP

Marquez surprises Di Giannantonio to win Brazil sprint

With 2 laps to go, Di Giannantonio wobbled and Marquez shot past

AFP
Goiania, Brazil

World Champion Marc Marquez pounced on a late error by Fabio Di Giannantonio and then held off a desperate last-lap counter-attack to win the delayed sprint race as MotoGP continued its chaotic return to Brazil yesterday.

Friday's practices for the first MotoGP in Brazil in 22 years were delayed by mud deposited on the track by the week-long downpour and then disrupted by more rain.

Yesterday, after Di Giannantonio topped the morning's qualifying session in dry conditions, a hole opened up in the main straight, another consequence of the recent torrential rain in central Brazil.

Following rapid road repairs, the flag dropped 80 minutes late for the sprint.

Di Giannantonio, on a Ducati satellite VR46, bolted from pole with only Marquez on his factory Ducati able to give chase.

With two laps to go, Di Giannantonio, who has never won a sprint race, wobbled and Marquez shot past. The Italian was on the Spaniard's rear wheel throughout the last lap but Marquez filled every potential hole.



Ducati Team's Marc Marquez in action with VR46 Racing Team's Fabio Di Giannantonio during the sprint at the Brazil Grand Prix in Autodromo Internacional Ayrton Senna, Goiania, Brazil, yesterday. (Reuters)

"Super important victory because in Thailand I was suffering," said Marquez. "I'm still not riding as I want, but just keep pushing."

He said that he expected to have to battle the "super-fast" Di Giannantonio again today.

Di Giannantonio rued his mistake but was happy with his podium place.

"The conditions were different from this morning," he said. "On two corners there was less grip. In the same corner I did two mistakes and I ruined my race."

"We have to be super happy," he added. "Second place, super close to Marc. Let's give it another go tomorrow."

The joy seemed to be greater with each step down the podium.

Jorge Martin, who followed his 2024 world title with a catastrophic campaign marked by injuries following serious crashes and disputes with his Aprilia team, was euphoric as he tried to lead the Brazilian crowd in cheers.

"I'm really happy," the Spaniard said. "Been a tough journey."

Martin competed in only seven races last season and did not finish higher than fourth.

"Two months ago my friend was feeding me," he added making a spoon-feeding gesture, "and now I'm here."

Spain's Pedro Acosta stayed atop the standings after finishing ninth. He is two points ahead of Marco Bezzecchi who was fourth in the sprint.

Martin rose to third in the standings at eight points and Marquez to sixth, 12 adrift.

CYCLING

Pogacar feels 'relieved' after posting win at Milan-San Remo

AFP
San Remo, Italy

Tadej Pogacar admitted yesterday that he was relieved to finally win Milan-San Remo and hinted that he was done with the grueling Italian race after edging an epic.

World champion Pogacar beat Tom Pidcock to the finish line by centimetres and ended a long wait to win "La Classiccissima" which had become an obsession.

The 27-year-old suggested that he may not return to the Italian Riviera after years of training around what he called "criminal" Italian traffic on the portion of the course which hugs the Mediterranean Sea.

"It was a lot of times training going to San Remo and basically you risk your life every training that you do here," Pogacar told reporters.

"It's one of the most unpredictable races I've ever done and I think it is one of the most unpredictable races in the world."

"It's quite a relief to finally win it. It's been many years training here and I will miss it."

Yesterday's important win was all the more remarkable because Pogacar crashed just before the key Cipressa climb, the 27-year-old saying he slid along the tarmac "longer than any water slides that I ever did".

Pogacar now needs only Paris-Roubaix to complete his collection of road cycling's five "Monument" races, with the "Hell of the North" coming up next month.

Eddy Merckx, Rik Van Looy and Roger De Vlaeminck are the only men who have won all five Monuments.

"We also put a lot of effort this winter for Roubaix, but yeah, I'm just so happy now in San Remo that whatever comes next is fine and I will not beat my head or anything," added Pogacar.

"Of course the shape is good and I will go to (the Tour of) Flanders and Roubaix with a strong team. We'll go for the win in both races, we will try and it's not only me in the team that has a chance to win, so yeah, we'll see."



UAE Team Emirate's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar on the podium of the 117th Milan - Sanremo one-day classic race, in Sanremo yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS

Sinner, Pegula advance to third round at Miami Open

AFP
Miami

World number two Jannik Sinner of Italy and American fifth seed Jessica Pegula won yesterday to reach the third round at the ATP and WTA Miami Open.

The 24-year-old Italian and reigning Wimbledon champion dispatched 76th-ranked Damir Dzumhur of Bosnia and Herzegovina 6-3, 6-3 on the Florida hardcourts.

"First round matches are never easy, so I'm very happy and let's see what's coming," Sinner said.

He will next face either France's 31st-ranked Corentin Moutet or Czech Tomas Machac.

Four-time Grand Slam winner Sinner, who won the 2024 Miami crown, captured his 25th career ATP title by beating Daniil Medvedev in the Indian Wells final earlier this month.

Sinner is trying to become the first man to sweep the "Sunshine Double" by winning at Miami and Indian Wells since Roger Federer in 2017.

On the women's side, US fifth seed Jessica Pegula advanced to the third round in only 38 minutes after Britain's Francesca Jones retired due to illness trailing 6-1, 3-0.

"I was just trying to focus on myself, stay in there every point, stay super positive," Pegula said. Pegula, last year's Miami runner-up, will next face Canadian 26th seed Leylah Fernandez, who eliminated fellow left-hander Oksana Selekhmeteva 7-6 (7/1), 3-6, 6-1 in two hours and 25 minutes.

ALCARAZ, SABALENKA POST CONTRASTING WINS

World number one Carlos Alcaraz was dialed-in on Friday, powering past rising Brazilian talent Joao Fonseca 6-4, 6-4 to reach the third round of the Miami Open.

The 22-year-old Spaniard used an early break in each set and saved all three break points he faced in a confident performance at Hard Rock Stadium, where 19-year-old Fonseca was cheered by a raucous contingent of fans.

"I was really good from the beginning until the last ball," Alcaraz said.

"I know how good Joao is and that's why I was really focused, every point, every shot, trying to figure out what is the best possible shot for me."

Alcaraz bounced back from his semi-final loss to Daniil Medvedev at Indian Wells last week to improve to 17-1 in 2026.

That includes an Australian Open title that made him the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam and a title in Doha.

"He had a lot of chances to stay in the match to (keep it) tight, so I'm just happy to stay calm, stay positive at these moments," said



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain hits a backhand against Brazil's Joao Fonseca at the 2026 Miami Open yesterday. (Reuters)

Alcaraz, who next faces American Sebastian Korda, a 6-0, 6-3 winner over Camilo Ugo.

Women's number one Aryna Sabalenka held off determined American Ann Li 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 to launch her Miami title defense.

The Belarusian was pleased to get through in straight sets against her 39th-ranked foe in a match moved to the third show court as organizers hustled to get the rain-hit tournament back on schedule.

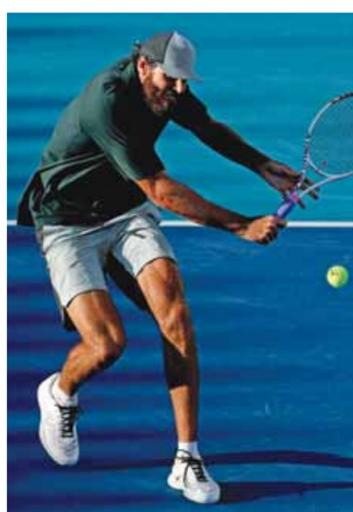
She needed more than an hour to pocket a first set in which she led 4-1 and wasted seven break points in the eighth game.

Third-seeded Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina, fourth-seeded American Coco Gauff and sixth-seeded compatriot Amanda Anisimova also reached the third round.

In other men's action on Friday, 56th-ranked American Ethan Quinn upset Norway's 11th-seeded Casper Ruud 6-4, 7-6 (9/7).

Britain's Jack Draper suffered a surprise defeat to American Reilly Opelka while Japanese wildcard Rei Sakamoto bagged his maiden ATP match win, converting his fifth match point in a 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (9/7) first-round victory over Aleksandar Kovacevic.

Opelka won 7-6(3) 7-6(0), firing 25 aces and 47 winners to reach the third round on home soil.



Reilly Opelka of the US comes to the net against Jack Draper of Great Britain at the Miami Open in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

FOCUS

Verstappen enjoys F1 weekend off with Nuerburgring victory

AFP
Paris, France

Max Verstappen took a break from a frustrating Formula One season by winning a four-hour endurance race at the Nuerburgring in Germany yesterday.

The Dutch four-time Formula One champion has said he plans to race in the 24 Hours of Nuerburgring in May. Yesterday he split time at the wheel of a Mercedes

sporting Red Bull livery with co-drivers Frenchman Jules Gounon and Spaniard Daniel Juncadella.

Verstappen was sixth in the F1 season-opening Australian Grand Prix on March 8 before failing to finish in Shanghai last Sunday.

He returns to Asia for the Japan Grand Prix next Sunday.

Competing in the GT3 class, Verstappen grabbed pole position on the full 24.358-kilometre configuration of the Nuerburgring by nearly two seconds and then helped his team win the race by almost exactly a minute.



Max Verstappen with co-drivers Frenchman Jules Gounon and Spaniard Daniel Juncadella.

WIMBLEDON TO INTRODUCE VIDEO REVIEW TECHNOLOGY

London: Wimbledon will introduce video review technology this year that will allow players to challenge judgement calls made by the chair umpire, the Grand Slam's organisers said yesterday. Players will not be able to challenge the decisions of the electronic line calling (ELC) system that was introduced at Wimbledon last year, but video reviews will be available to check other scenarios, like whether a ball has bounced twice or touched a player's racket or body. "Players will be allowed to review specific judgement calls made by the chair umpire (such as, for example, 'not-up', 'foul shot', 'touch') either on a point-ending call, when a player immediately stops

play, or immediately after the completion of a point (in the case of hindrance)," the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club (AELTC) said in a statement. "Players will not be limited in the number of reviews they can request." The video reviews will be introduced on six show courts, including the Centre Court and Court One. "The technology will be available on Centre Court and Court One throughout the championships and on the other show courts until the conclusion of all singles matches on those courts," the AELTC added. This year's Wimbledon starts on June 29.

BUNDESLIGA

Kane moves closer to goals record as Bayern sink Union

'It's still possible, I just have to keep doing what I'm doing'



Bayern Munich's Harry Kane scores during the Bundesliga match against Union Berlin in Munich. (Reuters)

AFP
Munich

Serge Gnabry scored twice and Harry Kane inched closer to the Bundesliga single-season goal record as Bayern Munich beat Union Berlin 4-0 at home. Kane's second-half strike took him to 31 this campaign – the same number Union have scored all season – and 10 short of Robert Lewandowski's mark from 2020-21, with seven games to play. Michael Olise struck for the brilliant Bavarians. "It's still possible, I just have to keep doing what I'm doing," Kane told reporters about the record. "All it takes is a hat-trick or a couple of braces in a row and then it'll look a bit more likely."

Bayern have 97 goals this season, four short of the best mark set in 1971-72, when Franz Beckenbauer and Gerd Mueller helped the Bavarian giants tear through the Bundesliga. Coach Vincent Kompany made five changes from the side which thumped Atalanta on Wednesday to set up a Champions League quarter-final clash with Real Madrid, but kept Kane front and centre.

Union, who had never beaten Bayern in 14 clashes, held out until the 41st minute, when

Olise collected a punted Leon Goretzka pass and curled the ball into the top corner. Gnabry made it two just before the break, knocking in a rebound at the far post.

Kane pirouetted and curled in Bayern's third just after the break, boosting his tally to 48 in 40 games in all competitions this season. Gnabry was again in the right place to volley in with 67 minutes gone to add gloss to another big Bayern win.

Rami Bensebaini scored two second half penalties as Borussia Dortmund came from two goals down to win 3-2 at home against promoted Hamburg and all but lock up second spot. Philip Otele and Albert Sambi Lokonga scored to put Hamburg two goals up at half-time, after Dortmund's Felix Nmecha missed a penalty just before the break.

Bensebaini converted a penalty after 73 minutes to bring Dortmund back into the match and Serhou Guirassy hammered in a rebound while off balance five minutes later. With six minutes left, Jobe Bellingham tried a long-range effort which hit Miro Muheim's hand, bringing Bensebaini to the spot again. The Algerian nervelessly converted to bring Dortmund in front and put the hosts on track for victory.

Second-placed Dortmund are 11 points clear

of RB Leipzig in third but remain nine points behind leaders Bayern. Bayer Leverkusen's top-four hopes took a hit with a 3-3 draw at rock-bottom Heidenheim after leading 2-0 at half-time and 3-2 with five minutes remaining.

The draw leaves Leverkusen sixth, four points behind Leipzig, Stuttgart and Hoffenheim, who are all level on 50 points. Stuttgart have a game in hand. "I'm speechless," goalkeeper Mark Flekken said. "We talked at half-time about not getting complacent."

Hoping to bounce back from Tuesday's Champions League exit at Arsenal, first-half goals to Malik Tillmann and Patrik Schick had Leverkusen on course for a routine win. Heidenheim fought back through a Hennes Behrens goal and a Marvin Pieringer penalty. Schick once again gave Leverkusen the lead with a header but Pieringer levelled again from a corner with 85 minutes gone.

Justin Njinmah scored the only goal as Werder Bremen won 1-0 at Wolfsburg to push their hosts closer to a first ever Bundesliga relegation. Second-last with just one victory in the calendar year, 2009 German champions Wolfsburg could be six points from safety if St Pauli beat Freiburg today.

Elsewhere, Rhine rivals Cologne and Borussia Moenchengladbach played out a 3-3 draw.

SERIE A

Milan keep title race alive with win over Torino

Agencies
Milan

AC Milan increased the pressure on rivals Inter Milan in the Serie A title race with a dramatic 3-2 victory over Torino yesterday, led by goals from Strahinja Pavlovic, Adrien Rabiot and Youssouf Fofana. With eight games left to play, Massimiliano Allegri's side cut the gap to leaders Inter to five points ahead of the Nerazzurri's clash with Fiorentina today.

After Nikola Vlasic and Rafa Obrador both spurned early half-chances, Milan broke the deadlock thanks to a stunning strike from Pavlovic, whose 20-yard effort thundered off the underside of the crossbar before dropping into the net. Torino responded just before half-time when Mike Maignan parried Vlasic's drive onto the post, with the rebound falling kindly for Giovanni Simeone to finish. Roberto D'Aversa's side might have held hope of securing a result at the break, but Milan raced out of the blocks in the second half and soon restored their advantage.

Luka Modric's clever pass found Christian Pulisic inside the box, and he squared it to Rabiot for a tap-in at the back post nine minutes after the restart. Just over one minute later, Fofana made it a two-goal advantage as he curled a delicate shot into the bottom right corner from the edge of the area, delighting the San Siro crowd.

A dramatic end saw Torino earn a penalty for their troubles as Simeone was dragged down by Pavlovic in the 82nd minute, with Vlasic softening the scoreline with a first-class spot-kick into the

top-right corner.

Milan are now unbeaten in their last 30 home Serie A matches against Torino (W21 D9). Their last home defeat to the Granata in the top-flight came in a 1-0 loss in March 1985. Only against Verona have Milan gone longer without a home league defeat, a run of 34 matches between May 1958 and December 2025.

On Friday, Scott McTominay scored the only goal after just two minutes as Napoli won 1-0 at Cagliari. Antonio Conte's side closed to within six points of Inter Milan. "Today we've put a bit of pressure on the teams at the top," Conte said. "Three points further into the Champions League spots, we've been extraordinary over the last seven months to stay in the top positions."

Scotland midfielder McTominay was starting his first match since February 7 after a tendon problem but tapped the ball into the empty net after it had bounced between goalkeeper Elia Caprile's legs. Conte could also count on the return of Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne who started for Napoli for the first time since being forced off with a leg injury on October 25 against Inter.

"Obviously having some players back is important, but what counts is them being at 100 percent," Conte said. "(Andre-Frank) Anguissa and McTominay aren't 'brilliant' again yet, Kevin I thought was doing well."

Cagliari's Sebastiano Esposito fired wide as the hosts missed the chance to level after 20 minutes with Napoli's Leonardo Spinazzola also clearing the ball off the line to prevent a late equaliser before the final whistle.



AC Milan's Youssouf Fofana and Adrien Rabiot celebrate with teammates during the Serie A match against Torino in Milan. (AFP)

FOCUS

Carrick fumes over penalty decisions as Man United held by Bournemouth

Reuters
Bournemouth, England

Manchester United manager Michael Carrick slammed the officiating in his side's 2-2 draw with Bournemouth after his team were denied a penalty, only to concede one in similar circumstances and have defender Harry Maguire sent off.

With United leading 2-1, Amad Diallo looked to have been pulled and shoved in the box but a VAR review decided that there was not enough contact to warrant a penalty, and minutes later referee Stuart Attwell pointed to the spot after a similar tussle between Maguire and Bournemouth striker Evanilson.

"I think they're both penalties and it's a massive moment in the game, and it ended up chaos after that. Massive moment, and I don't understand how you can give one and not the other, it's crazy," Carrick said. "If that's what he (Attwell) believes is a penalty to start with, then the second one has to be. I don't understand how you can't give that."

The failure to award a penalty for the incident with Diallo saw United go from potentially being 3-1 up to dropping two points in a 2-2 draw, but Carrick paid tribute to his side for their courage following the sending-off of Maguire. "To go with 10 men for so long and having to make changes, the boys off the bench finishing the game did really well. Delighted with that, seeing off the last moments that could've been really difficult, but we coped well," he said.

United enter the international break in third place in the table on 55 points, 15 behind leaders Arsenal and six adrift of Manchester City, and Carrick, appointed interim head coach in January following the departure of Ruben Amorim, does not expect the break to disrupt his side's momentum. "Boys are going away, and it feels a lot because of the international break, but we'll be ready for Leeds (United) when it comes," he said.

Carrick has lost just once in his 10 games



Manchester United's English Interim head coach Michael Carrick reacts at full-time after the Premier League match against Bournemouth at the Vitality Stadium in Bournemouth. (AFP)

since taking charge of the Red Devils, but his team were left hanging on for a point after Maguire's late red card.

United, who have missed out on the Champions League in the past two seasons, remained third in the Premier League and stretched their advantage over sixth-placed Chelsea to seven points. A place in the top five will almost certainly guarantee qualification for the Champions League due to the strong performance of English sides in European competition this season.

The sides shared a thrilling 4-4 draw when they last met in December and could have produced a similar scoreline in an encounter that raged from end-to-end. United had the better chances of a goal-less first half as Djordje Petrovic produced excellent saves to deny Fernandes and Amad Diallo. Instead, all four goals came in a 20-minute period in the second half.

Fernandes coolly slotted home the opener

from the penalty spot after Matheus Cunha was brought down by Alex Jimenez. Moments later the visitors wanted another spot-kick when Diallo crumpled under pressure from Adrien Truffert. As referee Stuart Attwell waved play on, Bournemouth sprang clear on the counter-attack to level with Truffert providing the assist for Christie to prod home an equaliser.

It took United just four minutes to restore their lead as Hill turned Fernandes' corner into his own net. Alex Scott rattled the United bar as Bournemouth again sought an immediate response and they salvaged a point. On the day Maguire earned a recall to the England squad for the first time since September 2024, he was sent off for pulling back Evanilson as the Brazilian bore down on goal. Junior Kroupi took responsibility from the spot to send Senne Lammens the wrong way and register the ninth Premier League goal of his impressive debut season in England.

Argentina to play Mauritania and Zambia in World Cup warm-ups

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina will face Mauritania and Zambia this month in World Cup warm-up matches, the South American nation's football body (AFA) said. Argentina had been due to play Spain in the "Finalissima" in Qatar, but the game was cancelled due to the conflict in the Middle East.

The matches will be played at Boca Juniors' La Bombonera stadium on March 27 and March 31, respectively. Mauritania had been scheduled to face Palestine in Morocco, but that game was also cancelled due to the conflict. It will be Argentina's third game in a row against an African team, after a 2-0 victory in Angola in November. Argentina had planned a friendly against Guatemala on March 31, but that match was cancelled after failing to receive FIFA approval because Guatemala were already scheduled to face Algeria in Italy. Argentina begin their World Cup title defence on June 16 against Algeria, before facing Austria and Jordan in Group J.

ALISSON RULED OUT OF BRAZIL SQUAD DUE TO INJURY

Alisson will miss Brazil's international friendlies against France and Croatia next week after the goalkeeper was ruled out with an injury, the Brazilian Football Federation said. Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti had included Alisson in the squad announced on Thursday, but the Liverpool keeper will be replaced by Corinthians' Hugo Souza, the federation added. Brazil are scheduled to play France on March 26 and Croatia on March 31 in Boston and Orlando, respectively. Alisson, 33, also sat out of Liverpool's trip to Brighton & Hove Albion yesterday, with Giorgi Mamardashvili starting in goal. Alisson has struggled with injuries this season, missing the club's Champions League last-16 first leg against Galatasaray on March 10, though he featured in their previous two matches. He has also missed eight Liverpool matches between October and November due to a hamstring problem.

GOALKEEPER GARCIA EARNS FIRST SPAIN CALL-UP, RODRI RETURNS

Barcelona goalkeeper Joan Garcia earned his first Spain call-up and Manchester City midfielder Rodri returned to the squad named on Friday for friendlies against Serbia and Egypt this month. Arsenal defender Cristian Mosquera, Real Sociedad's Ander Barrenetxea and Osasuna's Victor Munoz also received their first call-ups as coach Luis de la Fuente announced a 27-man squad ahead of this year's World Cup. Garcia, 24, has kept 11 clean sheets in 22 La Liga games. Rodri, the 2024 Ballon d'Or winner, was named in the national squad for the first time since September after missing the November camp. The 29-year-old has made only three international appearances since Spain clinched the 2024 European Championship due to a knee injury. Barcelona players Pedri and Fermin Lopez were also named in the squad with Paris St Germain's Fabian Ruiz sidelined by injury. Spain host Serbia on March 27 and Egypt on March 31, following the cancellation of the "Finalissima" against Copa America winners Argentina in Doha due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Spain are in World Cup Group H with Cape Verde, Saudi Arabia and Uruguay.

SQUAD: Goalkeepers: Unai Simon, David Raya, Alex Remiro, Joan Garcia **Defenders:** Marcos Llorente, Pedro Porro, Aymeric Laporte, Pau Cubarsi, Dean Huijsen, Cristian Mosquera, Marc Cucurella, Alejandro Giraldo **Midfielders:** Rodri, Martin Zubimendi, Pedri, Carlos Soler, Dani Olmo, Fermin Lopez

Forwards: Yeremy Pino, Alex Baena, Ander Barrenetxea, Victor Munoz, Mikel Oyarzabal, Ferran Torres, Borja Iglesias, Lamine Yamal